



Kenny, Bud, and Now Luther! Using Curtis' Books in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Christopher Paul Curtis is an internationally known author of books loved by young adult readers. *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* and *Bud, Not Buddy* have now been joined by *Bucking the Sarge*, Curtis' newest book. This article will share information about each of the texts, as well as how they can be used in the classroom, with activities and strategies for before, during, and after reading.

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On September 14, 2004, a collective “Thank you!” might have been heard from middle grade readers throughout the country in response to the publication of Christopher Paul Curtis’ latest young adult novel! It has been a long, five-year wait for *Bucking the Sarge*, but Curtis’ new protagonist, Luther T. Farrell, was well worth it!

Many readers have been fans of Curtis’ work since his first novel, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*, was published in 1995. This book was recognized as both a Newbery and Coretta Scott King Honor Book. His second novel, *Bud, Not Buddy* followed in 1999, and received the 2000 Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award. Though each of the three books is set in a different time, with different characters facing different problems, the books form a trilogy of sorts that will be welcomed by young adult readers. In this article, I will share ideas as to how Curtis’ books can be used in the classroom, focusing on before, during, and after reading strategies and activities. For those of you who do not know Curtis’ works, I will begin with a brief summary of each of the books and then share some information about the author.

Curtis’ Three Books

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

The Watsons is an historical fiction novel about a family of five living in Flint, Michigan in the 1960’s. Ten-year-old Kenny, the main character, his older brother Byron and little sister have led relatively peaceful lives, without experiencing the overt racial prejudice evidenced in the South during that time. As a young teen, Byron has been getting into trouble, so his parents decide to take him away from the city for the summer. Thus, the Watsons all travel in the family car, the “Brown Bomber”, to Alabama to Grandma Sands’ home. While in Birmingham, Kenny and his family come face to face with the reality of being black in the South in 1963, as they witness one of the most hateful events in



American civil rights history. Though parts of the book deal with serious issues, Kenny tells the story of his family with a humor and wit that appeals to young readers.

Bud, Not Buddy

Bud, Not Buddy is an historical fiction novel, once again set in Michigan. Times are hard for ten-year-old Bud Caldwell, growing up in the Depression of the 1930's. Since his mother died, Bud has lived in an orphanage. Soon after moving into a foster home, and running away, Bud is on his own. Bud never knew anything about his father, except for some clues his mother left for him: flyers from a jazz band, Herman E. Calloway and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression. Bud keeps these flyers, along with his other important, secret things in his suitcase. Without any other information, Bud decides to look for Herman Calloway, who he suspects is his father. Bud is able to navigate his way, both figuratively and literally, directed by his "Rules and Things for Having a Funner Life and for Making a Better Liar Out of Yourself". As in *The Watsons*, *Bud, Not Buddy* is written with laugh-out-loud humor, interspersed with the serious issues of prejudice, the depression, and life as an orphan.

Bucking the Sarge

Bucking the Sarge is a contemporary novel for older readers, again set in Flint, Michigan. Fifteen-year-old Luther T. Farrell lives with his mother, AKA, the Sarge. She lives her life ruled by her "Sargisms", as Luther calls them, such as, "Take my advice and stay off the sucker path". The Sarge is a tough and angry woman, who wants her son to follow in her footsteps. However, her footsteps walk close to the edge of the law, seeing that she is the owner of slum housing, a questionably-run halfway house for mentally ill men, and a loan shark business (The Friendly Loan Company). Luther spends his time out of school working for his mother by taking care of his "crew" (the men from the home) and cleaning up apartments after the tenants leave. The Sarge pays Luther by setting aside his earnings into his growing (\$90,000 plus) college fund. Despite his family circumstances, Luther is bright and focused on getting into a good college, fancying himself as a philosopher-in-training. He sets aside time every day to work on his science project, dreaming of a "three-peat" first place win. Luther's project has to do with the dangers of lead paint. He is acutely aware of the problem, because this is the kind of paint his mother uses in the apartments she leases. When Luther wins the science fair as the Sarge watches from her front row seat, he sees that his mother is furious, for his project is surely at odds with her business interests! Luther decides that it would be best for him if he leaves Flint, but not before taking revenge on the Sarge and her number one thug assistant, Darnell Dixon. In the end, Luther becomes a latter-day urban Robin Hood, as he takes from his rich mother and gives to his less-fortunate friend, Sparky, and his crew.

The Author: Christopher Paul Curtis

Christopher Paul Curtis was born and raised in Flint, Michigan, the setting for his three novels. After he finished high school, Curtis worked at the Fisher Body Plant hanging doors on Buicks for thirteen years. It was during this time that he began writing the draft of *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. He and his co-worker devised a plan by which they would take turns working for



thirty minutes hanging all the doors, rather than every other one, while the other took a break. Curtis used his break for writing!

After leaving the plant, Curtis worked at a variety of jobs while attending school at the University of Michigan. In 1993, his wife, Kaysandra, offered to work so that Christopher could write full time. He accepted her offer, and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963* was completed. And Christopher Paul Curtis, award-winning author was born!

Clearly, Curtis' family and his own experiences provide a rich source for his stories. In an interview with Horn Book magazine (Lamb, 2000), Curtis said that Kenny is a combination of his brother and himself. Curtis' grandfather was Herman E. Curtis, the 1930's bandleader of Herman Curtis and the Dusky Devastators of the Depression! Obviously, family and heritage are important to Curtis, as illustrated by his novels. All three are about families, though in different ways. Kenny is from a strong family; Bud is searching for a family; and Luther is trying to get away from his family!

When Curtis writes, he does not write to a specific audience. Rather, he writes because he has a story he wants to tell. In an interview about his writing (Welch, 2000) the author said that he hopes that the books he writes will touch the people who read them. When he was growing up, he rarely read a story that was about someone like him. Through Kenny, Bud, and Luther, Christopher Paul Curtis hopes to change that for this generation of readers.

Strategies for Middle School Students

Before Reading

For middle grade students to appreciate each of Christopher Paul Curtis' books, it is crucial that background information be provided before students begin their reading, as each text deals with a time in American history or facets of urban life today which may be unknown to the readers. By providing this information or activating the prior knowledge some may have, students can approach the books with a clearer sense of what the characters are experiencing. By exploring the Internet, students should be able to learn enough about the topics in Curtis' books to enable them to relate to circumstances of Kenny, Bud, and Luther. Table 1 provides a listing of possible topics to explore before reading the texts.

Table 1

<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>	<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i>	<i>Bucking the Sarge</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's• the church bombings in Birmingham	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• the Great Depression• soup kitchens, bread lines• Hoovervilles• racism• jazz in the 30's	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• slum lords and slum dwellings• lead paint

Another important pre-reading strategy to consider is the use of book talks. Think of yourself as a reader. Do you not appreciate hearing about books your friends have enjoyed? Has anyone ever



told you just enough about a book to peak your interest? That is what we can do in the classroom through book talks. By sharing the salient parts of each of these books, students will be better able to choose one to read (if that is your purpose) or to approach the new text with a curiosity and interest that merely assigning books to read does not evoke.

Since two of Curtis' books are historical fiction pieces, it would be enlightening for the students to talk with people who have lived in the eras depicted in *Bud, Not Buddy* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963*. This text-world connection could be done in two ways. First, students could develop an oral history of the time by conducting interviews with family members, friends, or acquaintances who had life experiences with the Great Depression or the Civil Rights Movement. The information gathered individually could be shared in an exciting round table discussion in which the interviewers take on the role of the person or persons they interviewed. Another way to help students expand their prior knowledge of these times in our history would be to invite guest speakers into the classroom. It would be helpful for students to spend time planning the interviews by developing together a list of questions to be asked. As students read the texts, they would be able then to make connections between what they are reading and what they learned from their interviews, thus increasing their levels of comprehension and understanding of the issues relevant to each story.

During Reading

Classroom teachers, of course, should decide on the best way to use Curtis' three texts, whether the whole class reads each book together, or students choose which of the three to read. In either case, a student-written classroom chart, as in Table 2, of the story elements of each book would be an interesting project.

Table 2

	<i>The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963</i>	<i>Bud, Not Buddy</i>	<i>Bucking the Sarge</i>
Genre			
Setting			
Time			
Protagonist			
Secondary Character(s)			
Problem			
Solution			

A more individual project would be for students to use reader response logs as they read the texts. When I used this strategy, I provided the students with "shape books" made from die cuts as an extra incentive for their writing. For *The Watsons* we used car-shaped journals, ala the "Brown Bomber; for *Bud, Not Buddy* we used suitcases; for *Bucking the Sarge* we used paint cans! These small books are fun for the students to use and the writing space is small enough so as not to intimidate reluctant writers. To encourage students to make connections with the text, divide the logs into three sections: text-self, text-text, and text-world. Be sure to model for the children how they would respond in each of these sections. Text-self: What in this story reminds you of something that happened to you



or to someone you know? Text-text: What have you read in this story that reminds you of another story you've read or heard? Text-world: What have you read that reminds you of things that are happening in the world today? By encouraging the readers to write about these connections, they are able to move away from writing that sounds like book reports and move toward real reflective writing.

Another way to increase students' interaction with the stories as they read would be for them to write diaries as if they were a character in the text. As they read, they could discuss various events that happen during the story and then reflect on how and why they affected the character. Sharing their diary entries would evoke rich conversation!

Students would also benefit from discovering "Found Poetry" as they read the texts. For this activity, students would take sections of the story and, choosing very carefully, create a found poem. The poems could then be read aloud and discussed. Here is an example from *Bucking the Sarge* that would encourage conversation about this aspect of Luther's life:

Moving Day
The begging and crying and wailing
of freshly out-on-the-street people
is always sad,
and before you get used to it,
it will cost you a bunch of sleep. (p. 45)

By selecting pieces such as this one, students would be able to share important aspects of the texts relating to the characters and the issues relevant to the story line.

As readers ourselves, we often take the time to mark a particular spot within a text as we read. Perhaps it's a quote that surprises us; it may be an event that serves as a turning point in the story; it may show an aspect of a character that we hadn't noticed before. Students reading classroom texts, however, may not be able to enjoy the luxury of marking in their books. Therefore, a simple solution would be to provide a small pad of post-it notes to the students for use as they are reading. This no-bother technique would certainly provide the impetus for students to make connections with the texts during reading.

After Reading

Jim Trelease tells us that we "paper and pencil" books to death in school. When speaking at the NCTE Conference in 2001, he asked his audience to reflect on how often as readers we rush to make a diorama after reading a new book! Rather, he said, we should do what Oprah does: TALK about books! Curtis' trio of young adult books richly lend themselves to talk! Literature discussion groups would be a wonderful strategy to use after reading these books. The groups could be formed in two ways.

First, if everyone is reading the same book, why not make smaller groups for discussion. Rather than forcing the conversation through teacher-developed questions, consider allowing the conversation to flow naturally. When I have done this, I prepare some open-ended questions that I put in envelopes on the tables, so that if the discussion lags or gets too far off track, the questions can bring the students back to the topic. However, if literature discussion groups are a natural, usual part of your classroom, you will find that the envelopes may remain sealed!



Another way to use the literature discussion would be to have mixed groups, so that in a group of six, for example, two would have read about Kenny, two about Bud, and two about Luther. Since all three books have a young male as the protagonist who is facing a difficult problem, discussion should come easily. Students are usually anxious to tell others about the books they have read, especially when the main characters are as multi-faceted as these boys! Curtis' books lend themselves beautifully to using a Venn diagram as a graphic organizer for comparing and contrasting the stories. This mixed-group method of discussing the stories would provide a perfect opportunity for students to work together to visually represent their discussion.

After students have read about Bud, Kenny, and Luther, they will, no doubt, have some lingering questions about the boys. Writing to Christopher Paul Curtis (in care of Random House Children's Books) to ask these questions would certainly be a viable and worthwhile option. However, before putting pen to paper, it would be well for the students to get to know Curtis a bit. One way to do that would be for the students to listen to (or read) an interview of Curtis that was aired on the Tavis Smiley Show on PBS on January 11, 2005. Simply go to: www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley and click on the archives tab. Another source for an interview is <http://summerreading.nypl.org/read2002/chats>.

Curtis' style of writing is such that, as readers, we feel as though we really come to know Bud, Kenny, and Luther. Therefore, the students might enjoy working together in small writing groups to develop sequels to the books. This would be a way for students to answer their own "what will happen next" questions about the characters. Working in small groups would have the additional advantage of encouraging the readers to engage in focused talk about the books and the characters, supporting their ideas by referencing the text. Discussions such as this often provide new understandings regarding a story by listening to the viewpoints of other readers.

Websites to Explore

There are many websites that will provide more information about these texts and Christopher Paul Curtis. Here is a sampling:

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963

www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog
www.carolhurst.com/titles/watsons.html
www.multcolib.org/talk/guides.html

Bud, Not Buddy

www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog
<http://eduscapes.com/reading/bud/>
www.readingmatters.co.uk/books/bud-not-buddy.htm
wwwpe.umanitoba.ca/cm/vol6/no11/bud.html
www.multcolib.org/talk/guides.html

Bucking the Sarge

www.randomhouse.com/teachers/catalog
www.commonsemmedia.org/reviews/review.php?id=2868&type=Book
www.teenreads.com



Final Thoughts

One of the wonderful things about young adult literature is that it has great appeal for teen readers as well as for adult readers. Christopher Paul Curtis' books are excellent texts that can be enjoyed by readers aged 10 to 100! Curtis' strong characters "hook" us as readers. We come to care about Kenny, Bud, and Luther; we worry about them; we want to defend them; we cheer for them. I encourage you to come to know Christopher Paul Curtis and his books. You and your students will be the richer for it.

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